

Council mulls options for Verizon complaints

County Council members are looking into whether the county can put stop-work orders on permits issued to Verizon, in the wake of growing complaints over power and telephone disruptions caused by workers laying cable to expand the company's network.

"A day does not go by without getting a complaint," said Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown. "It's a source of significant frustration."

Speaking during Tuesday morning's County Council session, Knapp said Verizon responds "lackadaisically" to repair mistakes by its employees and its contractors.

"I'm fed up," said Knapp, who noted his pro-business reputation in his three years in office. "One of their staunchest allies is saying, 'Hold on, fellas.'"

Verizon is placing 25 million feet of fiber-optic cable to enhance voice and data connections to homes and businesses in the region.

Company spokesman Harry Mitchell said Verizon had a "pretty good" record in the project, committing 19 faults per 100,000 feet of cable buried. Some of those were unavoidable, he said, because they involve underground cables that have been mismarked or buried too shallowly.

"When we fall short, we're all about fixing it, making it right and learning from it so it will never happen again," Mitchell said.

To bury the cable, Verizon needs utility permits from the county. Council members wondered whether the permits, and possibly stop-work orders, could give the county some leverage.

Verizon is negotiating a cable television franchise agreement with the county, which sparked questions Tuesday morning. Was the Verizon work for the still-to-be-decided cable network or for the company's existing business? Why would the county provide permits before the franchise was hammered out?

Mitchell, speaking from the company's offices in West Virginia, said new cables are for telephone and data transmission, although fiber-optic lines also can carry video.

"I'm not prepared to vote in favor of a franchise agreement that got that with practices that are questionable," said Councilman Michael L. Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg.

Leash law OK'd

Dog owners will need to leash their pets under new animal control laws passed unanimously Tuesday.

The law includes a new defini-

CouncilNotes

by Douglas Tallman

Keep it zipped

Also in a unanimous vote, the County Council made illegal public urination and defecation, which previously was not covered by county law.

Businesses, particularly in the Wheaton central business district and along Flower Avenue in Takoma Park, complained.

If convicted, a violator would have committed a Class A violation, which means the county could prosecute the crime as a civil violation with a \$500 fine, or it could be treated as a misdemeanor, carrying a \$1,000 fine and six months in jail.

The law takes effect as soon as County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) signs it.

Stiffer tree-cutting penalties

Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring proposed stiffer penalties for violations to the county's forest conservation law, in the wake of the county's quarrel with Redskins owner Daniel M. Snyder.

Earlier this month, Snyder agreed to a \$37,000 fine for cutting down 130 trees from his River Road property, which is along a protected stretch of the C&O Canal. Snyder also must replant trees and post a \$45,000 bond to cover the costs of the reforestation.

The county's current law limits fines to \$1 a square foot.

"If we're going to have a forest conservation law and if it is to have any teeth, it should have some significant penalties," Silverman said Tuesday.

In his bill, Silverman would have the council set a new upper limit by resolution.

The bill is co-sponsored by Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, Howard A. Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase, Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park and Michael L. Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg.

Tax break deadline extended

County residents have six more weeks to apply for an expanded "circuit breaker" property tax credit that could reduce tax bills by \$900.

The credit reduces the property tax of homes, assessed at no more than \$300,000, for owners whose income does not exceed \$55,000.

The law includes a new definition for bite — a "seizing or wounding with the teeth or mouth ... [with] a minimal medical or cosmetic injury." The old definition required a breaking of the skin.

The definition of "unwanted contact," where an animal can provide unsolicited threatening physical contact, also was changed. As previously written, a dog chasing a squirrel could be considered "unwanted contact."

come does not exceed \$55,000.

The state extended the Sept. 1 deadline to Oct. 31.

"Under this tax credit, those County residents with the greatest need will receive the greatest benefit," Council President Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park said in a statement.

Information on the property tax credit is available by calling the State Department of Assessment and Taxation at 1-800-944-7403.